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What it means to become a public relations professional: student perceptions of professional identity through real-world learning

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Abstract

Public relations educators need new solutions to prepare students to become tomorrow's practitioner today. Managers and employers in the new creative workforce (McWilliam, 2008) expect graduates to be problem solvers, critical and creative thinkers, reflective, and self-reliant (Barrie, 2008; David, 2004). Enabling students to develop these attributes requires a collaborative and creative approach to pedagogy (Jeffrey & Craft, 2001, 2004). A model for the next generation of public relations education was developed to integrate industry partnerships as a way to bridge pedagogy and professional practice. The model suggests (a) that industry partnerships be embedded in learning activities, (b) that assessment items be considered on a continuum and delivered incrementally across a course of study, and (c) that connections between classroom and workplace activities are clearly signposted for students.

This study reports on the first part of the model by examining how student perceptions of real-world industry partnerships contribute to learning outcomes and preparedness for practice. The paper provides educators with reference points to see how students interpret, and apply, knowledge and skills gained in classrooms to practice settings.

Literature review

Historically, the public relations academy has developed courses that prepare students for public relations practice. Research in public relations education has provided educators with insight into a range of strategies to enhance learning in order to meet industry expectations for job-ready graduates (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000; Ahles, 2004; Heyman, 2005; Pinkham, 2004). Although this work is important, it is yet to embrace and integrate higher education research. The integration of educational research is the first step required toward Badaracco's (2002) call for public relations educators to contribute to the body of literature on teaching.

In this paper we argue that, much like our counterparts in other professions such as medicine and accounting, public relations educators excel at preparing students to be excellent practitioners. Although public relations education has clearly integrated the interests of industry to design curricula and course outlines, perpetuating these processes will only allow us to suggest that our programs fit yesterday's practitioner. Yesterday's practitioner is known and knowable. In order to prepare our students for tomorrow's practitioner, we must engage in conversations with our colleagues in higher education and draw on educational research and institutional initiatives. Such a move will give educators the skills needed to structure, implement, and refine teaching and learning strategies to develop the skill sets for tomorrow's public relations practitioner.

That is not to say that educational researchers have all of the answers. In 1995 Klenowski argued for the importance of developing students' skills and attributes outside of the regulated learning environment. More recently, Barrie (2008) highlighted the elusiveness of meaningful solutions to close the gap between the rhetoric of graduate attributes and the reality of the student learning experience.

Some clues come from the strong focus on generic skills, graduate attributes, and professionalisation that have been influenced by a new and dynamic landscape of work and professions which demands a creative workforce (McWilliam, 2008). There has been a shift away from the command-and-control ethic of the more traditional constructs of a workforce, to an ongoing renegotiation of roles and responsibilities in a creative workforce. Self-motivation and self-management are seen as essential qualities in this new workplace. The shift has brought greater freedom for the new workforce, but with more responsibility and increased risk. Work now has a stronger focus on new types of social relationships, presents novel and unexpected challenges, values "big picture" and "outside the square" thinking, and values the ability to synthesise information across scenarios (Cunningham, 2006; Florida, 2002; Pink, 2006).

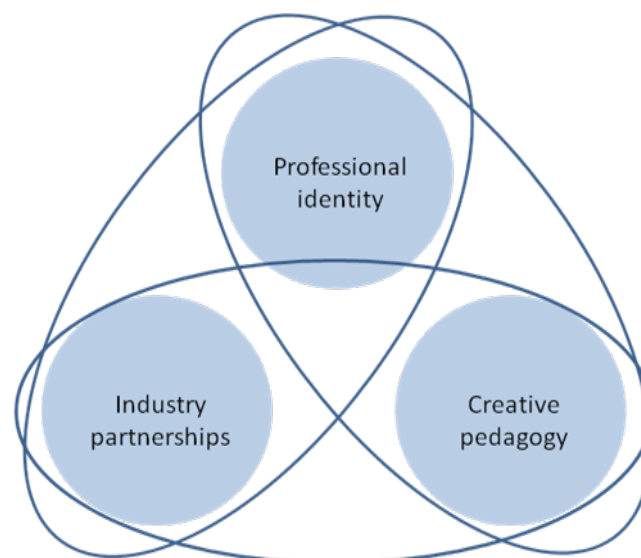
To create tomorrow's practitioner, educators, industry leaders, graduates, and students must focus on innovation and develop effective solutions that ensure students develop strong technical skills; while scaffolding and enabling the generic skills and graduate attributes that are so critical to employability and professionalism in public relations and across other disciplines. Programs and learning experiences must be designed for tomorrow's professional and future practice; as yet, these are not clearly defined, and they emphasise the unknown.

The role of education and educators, including universities, is being closely examined and debated. With the world of work constantly changing the question is asked: How does education prepare students for unknown future demands (Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz, & Dahlgren, 2008). Following Mehta and Xavier (2008), public relations educators must move beyond existing one-dimensional research and start new and collaborative conversations in order to extend research beyond a debate about the value of skills.

An Engaged Scholarship Model

Following Van de Ven's (2008) engaged-scholarship framework, this study proposes a model to integrate students, industry, and the academy to define, study, and resolve public relations problems within the context of the creative workforce and knowledge economy. Depicted in Figure 1, the model integrates creativity, pedagogy, diverse industry partnerships, and the understanding of professional identity as an approach to enhanced learning for students and the incubation of professionalism in the practice of public relations.

FIGURE 1
Engaged scholarship model of public relations practice and pedagogy.



An accurate professional identity involves students developing an understanding of the values, skills, and situations that commonly occur within that work role as well as organisational issues that need to be considered (Branch, 2002). The impacts and extent of the influence of professional training and education on the way people identify with their profession is now being examined to consider how students develop a sense of identity with their profession, how students engage with learning based on their professional expectations, and how their learning experiences in a university setting informs their professional formation (Reid et al., 2008). The model suggests a realistic and current view of the practice and profession of public relations is needed, along with a pedagogical approach that enables students to construct an emerging professional identity throughout their course of studies and after graduation.

Creative pedagogy encompasses both teaching for creativity and teaching creatively (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004) and a constructivist approach to learning with coparticipative coconstruction as a useful approach to develop productive collaboration and creativity in the classroom (Craft, 2008). The new generation of teachers must view themselves as designers of learning opportunities, with a focus on (a) using content to create new knowledge, and (b) seeing noise, uncertainty, and argument as part of learning (McWilliam, 2008). Students are equipped with skills to become reflective practitioners and lifelong learners. They become “prod-users” of disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge rather than passive recipients (Hearn, 2005). The model suggests that creativity be acknowledged as a valuable learning outcome, or “an end”, as well as an approach to learning, or “a means to an end”.

Industry partnerships as part of university curriculum are recognised, in public relations and other discipline areas, as a useful approach to teaching and learning. The model suggests that industry partnerships are most valuable when embedded in the curriculum and assessment and included as part of “soft curriculum” outside the structured program. Industry partnerships should be delivered incrementally across the program culminating in immersive experiences such as internships and work-integrated learning.

The model provides meaningful, real-world, learning experiences for all stakeholders and suggests that the relationship between the three key paradigms incubates professionalism in public relations; this provides ideal conditions for students to develop, accelerate, and launch as professionals in the discipline.

Methodology

Informed by the engaged-scholarship model, this pilot study seeks to explore the research question: How do students use real world learning to build their professional identity?

As a pilot study, the survey was distributed across four, undergraduate, public relations subjects and two postgraduate subjects. The four undergraduate subjects studied here are part of an eight-subject public relations major within a three-year undergraduate degree. In this degree—after completing these core subjects—public relations majors complete subjects designed to provide deep learning in public relations. In the undergraduate course—following the introductory subject that provides an overview of public relations theory and practice—two subjects build the writing and planning skills necessary for practice. Several third-level subjects provide a broad view of the strategic application of public relations: including public relations within organisations and global examples of public relations case studies. The capstone campaigns subject gives students the chance to integrate earlier learning by designing a campaign for a real-world client. In the final semester of study, students can elect to undertake an internship: a for-credit, work-integrated, learning experience in industry supported by on-campus and online learning activities. The two postgraduate subjects studied here are part of a six-subject public relations major within an 18-month masters degree. The degree focuses on building skills in specific practice areas like crisis, issues, and media relations.

Each subject included full and part-time public relations students: as well as students from other disciplines who were taking the subject as an elective. In line with the university's profile, the undergraduate and postgraduate students were both domestic and international and represented both school leavers and mature-age students returning to university after a period of absence from formal education. All students studied on campus.

Although 40 students responded to the survey, only 25 results were valid. The survey was open to 300 students who were enrolled across the six subjects. While the response rate for this survey was low, the survey was available for completion at the same time as the university-wide student evaluation of subject and teaching system. The university-wide student evaluation averaged a response rate of 35 percent. The authors believe that this contributed to the low response levels because students who completed the university-wide evaluation—which was also conducted online—may have presented their opinions within this survey rather than through the subject-specific questionnaire.

A short questionnaire was created to measure student responses to their learning. The questionnaire was administered to all students enrolled via each subject's Blackboard, online, learning site. The questionnaire aimed to understand the student experience of real-world learning within the context of the subject by asking three questions.

- What do you consider to be the key benefits of this real-world approach to teaching and learning?
- What do you consider to be the key challenges that you face as a result of this real-world approach to teaching and learning?
- What other comments, feedback, or suggestions can you provide in relation to this real-world approach to teaching and learning?

The context of real-world learning was outlined to students through a tailored introduction to the questionnaire: highlighting the key, real-world, learning experiences in the subject. The questionnaire was open ended. Students could attempt the questionnaire as many times as they liked and take as much time as they liked. The questionnaire was available for completion for six weeks—from week nine onwards—in a 13-week teaching semester. All students enrolled in the subject were eligible to complete the questionnaire. Completion of the questionnaire was optional: in line with the university's ethics approval for research on current students.

Limitations of the study related to (a) the features of the Blackboard, online, learning site that was used to collect the data; and (b) the time frame of the study. Due to limitations within Blackboard students' responses were not anonymous: meaning that teaching staff, which included the academic authors of this study, could access the students' comments. Specific strategies were set in place to manage the risks associated with this potential conflict of interest. No conflicts were evident during the study. For example, during the data collection phase, the author as unit coordinator did not open the student comments until after results were submitted. This approach is consistent with university-wide student evaluations where written comments are not released to lecturers until after results are finalised. In addition, when students had queries about the questions, they were directed to learning advisors who were independent of teaching staff.

The questionnaires were completed, and the data were analysed. The authors reviewed (a) student responses within the context of each subject's real-world learning strategies, and (b) the data with a focus on where students identified elements that supported their work towards creating or refining professional identity. Once these data points were identified, the

authors identified the key themes. Both authors worked together to identify (a) the student responses that related to professional identity, and (b) the themes that emerged. These processes were reviewed in consultation with learning designers who acted as independent auditors of the data. Although new to the public relations education literature, the methodology for this study is based on Van de Ven's (2008) engaged-scholarship model and the principles of reflective practice. Given the exploratory nature of this study the researchers sought (a) to identify key themes only, and (b) to use subsequent studies to evaluate the significance of these themes to students.

Findings

The findings for this study are presented based on the key themes identified in the data analysis. The results showed that students acknowledge the professional outcomes in learning experiences across all subjects. Key themes emerged iteratively through several readings of student responses within the context of subjects and based on key components of professional identity, creative pedagogy, and industry partnerships: as illustrated in the literature and model guiding this study.

The main themes linked to professional identity are

- students identifying as professionals-in-training;
- confidence and resilience;
- creativity;
- employers valuing students who have real-world learning experiences.

The theme of *professionals-in-training* emerged through student reports of university learning as preparation for real-world application. This theme was evident across all subjects, and Table 1 identifies the student comments that relate to this theme. Across all subjects students identify the value of a range of real-world learning activities and connect these skills and processes to employment and practice requirements. Across several units, students identify how their approach as professionals-in-training can directly contribute to their resumes and work portfolios.

TABLE 1

Data to Support Professionals-in-Training Approach

Subject	Student reports
<i>Undergraduate subjects</i>	
Planning	Gives students an idea of how public relations operates in a real-world context. Makes us better prepared for when we do work experience or actually get a job in the industry.
Cases	...also for them [allows students] to see different types of professionals etc in that field which they never realised had a position.
Campaigns capstone	I will leave [university name] with a portfolio of work. I had a portfolio of work a year ago when I decided to get a part-time industry job. A year later I have worked on even more clients.
Internship	Gain actual experience in your field which reflects well on CV and provides experience in your major before you graduate.
<i>Postgraduate subjects</i>	
Crisis communication	A real world approach enable [sic] the students to develop a critical understanding of issues and PR beyond the textbook while it is providing a connection to the real world some of us may not possess to the expected extend [sic].
Media relations	The key learnings of the real world teaching and learning is getting to know the feel of what the actual work relates to. Working for clients provide us with the actual challenges of protecting the image of our organisation through media relations. It also gives us deeper understanding of how media plays effective role in maintaining PR relations.

The theme *confidence and resilience* emerged through student reports of reflective learning and increased confidence and resilience as a result of being prepared to take risks in learning, integrate feedback, and learn from both success and errors. This theme was evident across all subjects. Table 2 identifies the student comments that relate to this theme. Student reports around confidence and resilience indicate the preference for a supportive learning environment to practise and experiment with their professional training. There is also some evidence of frustration with knowledge that is perceived to be "irrelevant to the real world" (see Cases). The postgraduate-student reflections demonstrate more confidence around learning, through their suggestions to improve learning and practice.

TABLE 2
Data to Support Student Confidence and Resilience

Subject	Student reports
<i>Undergraduate subjects</i>	
Planning	While this is still in the university setting and the skills learnt cannot directly translate to being 'on the job' it certainly allows students to have an insight into what is a given in practice - allowing for the practice and application of skills in a less threatening environment
Cases	Learning from a real world approach allows me to understand the relevant workings of the industry, and if I'm being told about something that is irrelevant to the real world, I don't see it as beneficial to my knowledge base. This means I will be less likely to be interested and do well in class.
Campaigns capstone	...the benefit of [university name]'s approach is that as I leave the school I have written countless media releases, I have already advised clients, and I can know what to expect.
Internship	The benefits are that you experience the job you want with people supporting you and helping you along the way.
<i>Postgraduate subjects</i>	
Crisis communication	The only challenge I thought was in getting the grasp of situations and conditions in different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and have [sic] a sense of its actual practicality. It will be good if such scenario could also be considered from varying degree of perspectives.
Media relations	Lecture driven kind of teaching and learning approach is no more considered a real world approach. In fact, providing opportunity for students by providing the flowing [sic] key benefits: real-life setting and context provide students with a variety of hands-on experiences, provide feedback about real-life, provide real world experience in applying theories and models into practical works.

The theme *creativity* emerged through student reports of pushing through structural requirements or boundaries of “standard” learning. This theme was evident across most subjects. Table 3 identifies the student comments that relate to this theme. The student reports in this theme indicate that respondents see value in creative thinking and learning techniques and link this to job-ready skills. Across all subjects with data, students showed that they supported knowledge for skills application moreso than knowledge for expertise.

TABLE 3
Data to Support Student Creativity

Subject	Student reports
<i>Undergraduate subjects</i>	
Planning	Sometimes by focusing on real world examples and case studies, there is less emphasis on core theory. This puts the onus on the student to undertake more study in their own time. While this can be stressful, motivated students will complete the necessary individual work. Sometimes during the subject I felt like I had not learned that much, but when it came to doing the assignments and talking about the topics with my peers, I found I actually knew more than I thought. Additionally, my understanding was more concrete - I knew it from the top of my head and could talk about it in any context without having to rely on notes or study memorised from a book. Sure, those things helped me but it was in the long-term I realised I really knew what I was talking about instead of just reciting it. I feel the knowledge I gained this semester will definiely [sic] stay with me alot [sic] longer than some of the other subjects I studied that were very concentrated on facts and theory.
Cases	Working through “real world” case scenarios increases our depth of knowledge and helps us to think outside the box. Since we are all students who are about to graduate we are equipped with the skills to make choices and initiate these into actions but may be limited in our creativity/imagination to the full scope of what we are capable of. By analysing international case studies, we are stretched to understand that we have access to a number of stakeholders and resources to help achieve set objectives.
Campaigns capstone	... the work was so close to the 'real world' that it was hard to draw a line between what we had to do to satisfy the assessment criteria and what we should do to satisfy the clients. I think essentially this is a good problem to have because it means we're thinking as a consultant would but some clear direction would really reduce the confusion and the stress around the presentations.
Internship	The ability to actually apply the knowledge gained in my degree was really interesting. Felt I had a lot more leeway to be creative and think outside the box in comparison to requirements created by university
<i>Postgraduate subjects</i>	

Crisis communication	To understand, no such [sic] theory can solve all cases in the reality, but they do have some common strategies and tactics , which are worthful [sic] to learn. As an international student, they opened another window for me to have a deeper understanding of crisis and communication.
Media relations	No data.

The theme *employers valuing the approach* emerged through student reports of perceived trust in students based on skills developed in class. This theme was evident across four subjects and is less defined than the first three themes. Table 4 identifies the student comments that relate to this theme. Although this theme was not found across all subjects, it was significant because it showed that students were clearly identifying learning not only with their professional identity, but with the expectations of employers.

TABLE 4
Data to support employer perceptions of the approach

Subject	Student reports
<i>Undergraduate subjects</i>	
Planning	Working with real clients encourages students to perform at their best, since we are helping real people.
Cases	No data.
Campaigns capstone	From an employer's perspective, they can trust [university name] graduates have a level of assumed knowledge.
Internship	I think these days it is necessary to have experience in the field you wish to work in. If you want to be in PR or advertising and you approach an employer with a resume that has no form of real world learning on it, I think it would be hard for you to get a job.
<i>Postgraduate subjects</i>	
Crisis communication	No data.
Media relations	Learning some things which were combined theories and real cases can help me to understand theories easily and i probobaly [sic] can know how to apply similar cases and theories for my job in the future.

Discussion and Conclusions

This pilot study provides initial support for the proposed engaged-scholarship model of public relations practice and pedagogy. The results of this study showed that students recognise connections among real-world learning, professional identity, and employer expectations.

The findings show that students use real-world learning to prepare for professional practice. For example, a number of the themes suggested that students evaluated their learning experiences based on (a) how they could apply knowledge, or (b) what artefacts or experiences they could present or demonstrate in a portfolio of work. In addition to this job-ready focus, student responses also indicated an understanding of skills required for ongoing professional development.

Previous studies around student expectations of careers in public relations have used lists of preferred areas of work to prompt responses (Bowen, 2003). Although the results of these studies are useful in course recruitment, they are not sufficient for course retention or student learning outcomes. This study addresses some of the limitations of existing studies by using an inductive approach through the perspective of real-world learning.

This pilot study captures student reports about their real-world learning experiences but does not consider industry or teaching perspectives. Further research is planned to more fully explore, refine and develop the model..

Now that there are initial data to support the model, focus groups with students will be held to more deeply and fully explore and understand the student perspective on real-world learning, professional identity, and creative approaches to teaching and learning. With these data, further studies will engage industry partners for their interpretations of data and perspectives on the components of the model (Van de Ven, 2008). This integration of industry partners is beneficial for research purposes and for course development and refinement.

A further component of the model that must be considered relates to creative pedagogy. The findings of this paper show support for creative teaching practices. However, creative pedagogy demands not only creative teaching practices but the facilitation of creativity and innovation.

Ongoing research will allow continuing refinement of the model to reach a robust and proven iteration, partnered by a suite of teaching and learning tools to support the model and scaffold positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

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